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Wang: Okay. So, this is an interview with Rick Risso. And this interview is taking place on August 9, 2018. And the interviewers are Susan Wang and...

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Lesyna: Kristine Lesyna.

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Wang: So now, we'll have you introduce yourself, Rick.

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Risso: My name's Rick Risso. Here in Santa Cruz, California at my home.

Lesyna: Perfect.

00:00:26

Wang: Cool. Thank you. So, we just wanted to start off with just asking about your history, how you got into fishing.

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Risso: Well, I kind of hung out down at the harbor when I was like, I don't know, 12-13 years old. And I, I bought... I acquired my first skiff when I was 13, 14. And I fished with hand lines in the summertime for sanddabs and rockfish. And then after that I started... I had a salmon boat. And I fished salmon for a few years when I was like, 18 on. And then I, and then I bought another boat just for the Halibut and seabass, White Seabass fishery, gill net fishery.

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Lesyna: Did you have family that was involved with fishing?

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Risso: No. No.

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Lesyna: Oh, interesting. So, you started hanging out at the harbor and that's how you became involved?

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Risso: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

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Wang: How did you learn about, or how to fish? Did others—

Risso: No.

Wang: ...teach you, or...

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Risso: It's trial and error.

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Wang: And you said you had several boats before?

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Risso: Oh, in the last 35 years I've had four boats.

00:02:04

Wang: Wow. What's your current boat?

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Risso: Vessel Tern from Southern California.

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Wang: Oh, okay.

Lesyna: And where is it now?

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Risso: It's in Half Moon Bay.

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Wang: Have you ever done anything else other than fishing?

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Risso: No. I've never had a boss.

Wang: [laughs]

00:02:26

Risso: Except for if you consider Fish and Game and... Fish and Game and Coast Guard a boss.

00:02:35

Lesyna: Can you tell us about your experience with the California Halibut Trawl Fishery, specifically?

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Risso: As for...

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Lesyna: So, like, how long have you been trawling for California Halibut?

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Risso: Oh. Once they closed the gill net fishery down outside 60 fathoms here, I, I put drag gear on the boat. That would be close to, close to 20 years now. 18-20 years since we got shut down in, in shallow water for the gill net Halibut fishery.

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Lesyna: And so, you said it's still open outside of 60 fathoms?

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Risso: Outside 60 fathoms.

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Lesyna: And that—you can't catch Halibut that—

Risso: No.

Lesyna: deep?

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Risso: No.

Lesyna: Oh, okay.

00:03:30

Risso: It's—you'd get a lot of Soupfin Shark and what-not.

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Lesyna: Can you fish other species that deep?

00:03:41

Risso: Yeah. But then there's the no rockcod take zones and this and that. And there's kind of a fine line, you know, where you'd be able to—you wouldn't be able to catch any Halibut. Other species, you know. But, like I say, there's a fine line 60 fathom and the rock, rockfish conservation areas and what-not.

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Lesyna: So, it's been 20 years since you started trawling for California Halibut. And, and what, what motivates you to keep fishing?

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Risso: You've got to pay the bills somehow.

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Lesyna: Is there anything you really like about fishing?

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Risso: Well... It used to be a lot funner when you, when I was younger.

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Lesyna: Then you said you, you liked being outside?

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Risso: Yeah.

00:04:52

Lesyna: And you like being your own boss.

00:04:54

Risso: Right.

00:04:55

Lesyna: Okay. We've heard that before.

00:04:56

Risso: And I can go to work when I—I can go to work when I want to go to work.

00:04:59

Wang: Hm.

00:05:03

Lesyna: Have you ever trawled for Halibut in places other than Half Moon Bay?

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Risso: Oh, yeah. We fish, you know, when I first started, I never fished Half Moon Bay area. We just fished here in Monterey Bay. And then that went on for a few years or what-not until they decided that Monterey Bay was state waters.

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Lesyna: When was that?

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Risso: Hm. I don't remember the date. Close to 12 years ago, maybe. I, I'm not quite sure on the date.

00:05:44

Lesyna: So, 2006, maybe?

00:05:46

Risso: I don't, I don't know.

Lesyna: Okay. And so—

00:05:51

Risso: And that was the only place I ever fished was in Monterey Bay for Halibut trawl.

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Lesyna: And so, you, you fished three miles off the coast of Santa Cruz?

00:06:04

Risso: Yeah. In Monterey Bay, outside of three miles around, you know, from Capitola to Moss Landing area. And in front of Santa Cruz outside of three miles. But now they consider Monterey Bay state waters which, we've been Halibut trawling here for God knows how many years. 100 years or whatever. And they have, and they decide now it's state waters from point to point? And then you've got to go three miles from Santa Cruz Point to Pinos Point. And then you've got to go three miles outside of that to be legal.

00:06:46

Lesyna: And is that too deep for Halibut?

00:06:47

Risso: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's—

Lesyna: Okay.

Risso: ...out of the question.

00:06:52

Lesyna: So, you had to find a different fishing area.

Risso: Right.

00:06:55

Lesyna: And that's how you ended up in Half Moon Bay?

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Risso: Pretty much. And, you know? It's... The conditions, the bottom and what-not is ideal. And... But, you know, a lot of times there's a lot rougher weather and you can't fish, you know, all the time that you would in the Bay. In Monterey Bay in the summertime you can fish every day. And then 11—you know when the wind's going to come up, at 11:00 northwest every day in the summertime. But in Half Moon, it's either really nice or really crummy. And for a small boat like mine, you know, it's pretty dangerous.

00:07:45

Lesyna: How big is your boat?

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Risso: 34 foot.

Wang: Oh, wow.

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Wang: Do you fish for anything else?

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Risso: Yeah. I fish Dungeness Crab also.

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Wang: Oh, okay. Is that based on the seasons, or...

00:08:04

Risso: Yeah.

Wang: Okay.

Risso: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

00:08:06

Lesyna: So, you do crab during the winter and—

Risso: Right.

Lesyna: ...Halibut during the summertime.

00:08:10

Risso: Right.

00:08:14

Lesyna: And when you do fish Halibut, what has your participation level been like over the years?

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Risso: Well, the last few years, not too much because of different things going on. But, you know, prior it was pretty much a lot of my income.

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Wang: So, when you're—would you describe to us like, what's a typical day for you when you're, when you're fishing for Halibut?

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Risso: Well, I leave the house at say, three in the morning. An hour drive to get to the—

00:09:02

Lesyna: Because you still live in Santa Cruz.

00:09:03

Risso: Yeah. I live in Santa Cruz. So, it's an hour drive to go to work. And then an hour to two hours boat ride to the fishing grounds. And then come in. Try to be in, you know, around darkish. Unload to the fish buyer. Drive home an hour. Basically, take a shower and go to bed and do it all over again, you know, if the fishing is good. So, it's—there for awhile my schedule was three in the morning. I'd leave the house at three in the morning and basically get to bed by 10:30 at night. And do it again. Six days a week.

00:09:56

Wang: Wow. That's—

00:10:00

Risso: Yeah.

Wang: ...a long day.

Risso: It was... Nobody could believe I was doing it.

00:10:07

Wang: Yeah. Are you—do you usually fish with somebody? Or is it, are you on your own?

00:10:12

Risso: Well, when I first started dragging for Halibut I was fishing by myself. And once you get older, then you—I've been taking somebody—

Wang: And—

Risso: ...who's a deckhand.

00:10:29

Lesyna: What do they help you do?

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Risso: Not much. [laughs] Probably five minutes' worth of sorting every tow. I make short tows. I make hour and a half to two-hour tows. And I have the gear up and back in the water in 15 minutes. And it's basically five minutes' worth of sorting, if that.

00:11:05

Wang: How do you decide where to go? Like, do you have certain spots, or do you...

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Risso: Yeah. There's, there's, basically, you know, half a dozen spots to, to check and look. You know, if there's nothing in one spot you go to the next spot. And—

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Lesyna: Do you usually go north or south? Or does it depend?

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Risso: It, it depends. Time of the year and, you know... Either direction is two hours from the harbor.

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Wang: Has that changed over time or has it been pretty consistent since you started?

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Risso: Traditionally it's the same spots where they show, where they show up and...

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Wang: Do you have a, a most memorable fishing day?

00:12:03

Risso: Hm. No, not really.

00:12:11

Lesyna: Have you ever been really surprised by what you caught in the net?

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Risso: Yeah. There's been times that I mean, I mean, zero bycatch. I mean, straight Halibut. I mean, it just, you know, really surprising. And I mean, just straight Halibut. And those were short tows. And...

00:12:45

Lesyna: So, we'll switch gears a little bit. Throughout your fishing experience can you tell us a little bit about how you've seen the California Halibut Trawl Fishery change over time? So, maybe we'll start with your fishing tactics. Have they changed?

00:13:01

Risso: No. It's the same. You know. Once you get something dialed in you don't want to—for me, I don't want to change nothing. You know? Things are working and what-not.

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Lesyna: Have you ever changed your trawl net gear?

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Risso: No, not really. It's, it's basically the same, you know, design and what-not that I started when I was, when I started dragging for Halibut. I, I don't know if I'm old-school or, or what. But I don't like changes.

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Lesyna: Can you describe your gear for us?

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Risso: I fish a, a light-touch small shallow net called a paranzella net. And for big boats I don't, you know... The, they're a, they're a big little net is what they are. They're a real shallow net. They don't rise too high. And they're fairly easy to tow. And that's what I've been using since I started.

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Lesyna: So, you said, you said light-touch. Does that mean... What does your footrope look like?

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Risso: All it is, is small loop chain.

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Lesyna: Oh, it's chain. Like, chain link.

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Risso: Yeah. Chain link looped. So, there's no real footrope. Footrope is three quarter inch polydac rope. And then with the, the chain attached to it. Just to keep it down.

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Lesyna: Does that mean you have bigger mesh too, like they use in Southern California?

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Risso: No.

Lesyna: The seven-and-a-half inch?

00:15:04

Risso: I do use a seven-and-a-half-inch cod end.

Lesyna: Oh, okay.

00:15:08

Risso: And that filters all the little stuff, little crab, little fish that I don't need to put aboard.

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Lesyna: Do you ever have problems with sea lions because of that mesh size?

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Risso: Yeah. If the sea lions are around they'll pull, you know, medium sized fish through the mesh on the cod end. They'll tear them out. And then I do have some chafing gear that kind of goes around the top of the cod end. It's called horsehair. It's just

a strand that kind of hides the fish's heads that are in the, the cod end.

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Wang: So, have, have you seen technology change over your years? And has that affected your fishing and fishing success?

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Risso: I, I don't, I don't know how to answer that because I... You know, like I say, I'm afraid to change anything. What's working is working. And... I don't know. For me it hasn't changed nothing.

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Lesyna: Do you have a GPS plotter on your boat?

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Risso: Oh, yeah.

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Lesyna: Did you have to navigate without one before?

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Risso: Well, in the early days, yeah. You know? And it was in other fisheries. But in the last 20 years, no.

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Lesyna: Okay. Have you seen any changes in the Halibut population overtime?

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Risso: You know, I think it maybe goes in cycles. You know? There's—sure. There's

other, you know, and there's years that there's a lot more than others. But I think that's all, you know, in cycles. There's years that you see a lot of small—a lot of short fish, undersized fish, which is a good sign. That means, you know, things are happening in the right direction.

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Lesyna: Do you have any idea of what might cause those cycles?

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Risso: No. I don't have a PhD behind my name.

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Wang: How about, how about other changes in just the marine environment? Have you seen any of those changes over your time?

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Risso: Well, there's a—for a while, like, for instance, in Monterey Bay and I don't know, up in Half Moon that there was years, a long like, 10 year stretch that you didn't see any Starry Flounders at all. Not a one. And normally in Monterey Bay you get a lot of Starry Flounders. And maybe that was from the, the outflows. You know, the chemicals that they're using. And there was other fish that disappeared that, I think are starting to come back now. Like, White Croaker kingfish. Croakers. For awhile you didn't see any. But now, I guess, they're coming back. Just like the flounder. They disappeared. Now they're come, they came back.

00:19:02

Wang: Why do you think that is? Is it...

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Risso: Maybe the, the... Like I say, the chemicals and the outflows could have had a lot to do with it. Maybe cleaning up, you know, San Francisco Bay.

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Lesyna: So, you think it's cleaner now than—

Risso: Yeah.

Lesyna: ...it was?

00:19:21

Risso: Oh, yeah.

00:19:31

Wang: So, how, so, how about for like, market demand. Have you seen any shifts in the market demand that have affected...?

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Risso: Yeah. It's actually been for the best.

Wang: Hm.

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Risso: The—when I... There was times, you know, 20 years ago plus when the northern hal- you had to compete with the northern Halibut. You had to compete with the Mexican Halibut. The northern Halibut, you know, back in the day they had derbies. You know, a two-day or a three-day or whatever, so many day openers that they caught as much as they could in that time period. And then that went on the market all at once. And it was kind of at the peak of our seasons here in California. So, we had to compete with the northern Halibut. But now they got the IQFs or what-not that, okay. The buyer says, okay, bring in 2,000 pounds today. And then next week bring in 1,000 pounds. So... And that's good because that's keeping their price up and our price. We're not competing with the glut of northern fish. So... Anyways.

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Lesyna: And when, when you say northern Halibut, you mean Pacific Halibut—

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Risso: Yes. Yes.

Lesyna: ...which is a different species.

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Risso: Hm-hmm, yeah. But I think, I don't, I haven't kept up with it. But I think the Mexican Halibut is still coming in fairly cheap. I don't, I don't know.

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Lesyna: How about the market for California Halibut specifically? Is it local or does it go other places?

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Risso: Yeah. I think it stays local. Yeah.

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Wang: How have you seen the local fishing community change overtime?

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Risso: Well, there's a... Well, in like, my fishery I, you don't see many new people, you know, because of permit-wise. And, you know, when I first started fishing, you know, you didn't need a permit. And now everything's limited entry and what-not. So, there's no new people getting into, you know, the Halibut trawl fishery or the gill net fishery and what-not. But in other fisheries you, I've seen people come and people go. You know. But it's a whole different generation or, you know,

youngsters are... Buying new boats and having boats built, and... I don't know.

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Lesyna: Can you tell us a little bit about what you think your future role in the California Halibut Trawl Fishery will be?

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Risso: I just take a year at a time. There's not that many, you know, boats fishing it. I don't know exact number, but... You know, there's not that many permits.

00:23:19

Lesyna: Are there fewer than there were when you started?

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Risso: When I, when I first started there was a lot of Vietnamese boats that were fishing Halibut trawl. A lot of them have sunk. A lot of them, you know, they got jobs or what-not. You don't see too many around anymore.

00:23:57

Wang: How about for the future of the fishery? Do you have any concerns for the fishery's future?

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Risso: I—that I, I don't know. I'd have to think about it, and... I, right now, I...

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Wang: Like, environmental or market?

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Risso: Well, there's always the environmentalists and the sport fishermen. You know, it's the, the... It's always been a rival between commercial and sport. You know? There's been a lot of times that, you know, things are working out, you know? The fishermen are working with the state and what-not. And then, you know, the state's getting sued by some organization or some group or whatever. And, you know, rather than the state working with the fishermen, they'll close something or, you know, ban it or whatever, rather than dealing with the environmental groups or the sport fishing groups that are suing the state.

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Lesyna: Do you have any ideas about how you think the fishery might change in the future?

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Risso: No. I just...

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Lesyna: Is there anything you hope to see happen in the future with the fishery?

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Risso: Well, I'd like to fish in the traditional areas that I did fish in. Other than that...

00:26:09

Wang: Is there anything else you'd want to share with us about your career, about your experiences?

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Risso: I'd just like to be able to fish where, where I traditionally started fishing in Monterey Bay. And there was no reason to close it.

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Lesyna: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

00:26:48

Wang: Yeah. Thank you for your time today.

00:26:51

Lesyna: We appreciate it.

00:26:53

Wang: Okay.

00:27:01

Lesyna: Thank you so much for taking the time—

[End recording at 00:27:03]